

2005

'The National Times: bastard of a paper'

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University of Wollongong

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‘THE *NATIONAL TIMES* - BASTARD OF A PAPER’©

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

MASTER OF ARTS BY RESEARCH (HONOURS)

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

JESSICA AMOS, BA, UNSW

SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND CREATIVE WRITING
FACULTY OF CREATIVE ARTS
2005

CERTIFICATION

I, Jessica Amos, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts by Research, in the School of Journalism and Creative Writing, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Jessica Amos

2005

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Abstract

'Bastard of a Paper' is a political documentary script which is supported by a thesis. It contends that 'the public right to know' requires more support against political expediency. The script depicts the conflict between 'hard-nosed' investigative journalists at the *National Times/Times on Sunday* and the NSW state and federal governments during the 1980s - an era renowned for its investigative reporting. Institutionalised corruption, which had been tolerated by previous governments despite numerous royal commissions on related issues, was the most contentious issue. The script implicates the ensuing political pressure - to sideline media investigation into corruption - in the demise of the *National Times* evident in the closure of the *Times on Sunday*.

The thesis, which is the second part of this work, contains the research which determines the construction of the script. The early part of the script establishes that the *National Times's* adversarial reporting originated in part from the 'era of dissent'. The 1960s and 1970s influenced the relationship between politicians, journalists and the public in favour of 'watchdog' journalism. In the script, the *National Times* team of journalists share a sense of egalitarianism. Their strong reporting was also due to the relative editorial independence at John Fairfax Limited especially after 1978 when James Fairfax replaced Sir Warwick Fairfax as Chairperson.

However, also at this time, the newly elected Wran state government was intent on ensuring the support of big business and especially the media. This agenda was a response to the fall of the Whitlam Federal Labor government in 1975 and the press's history of generally supporting Liberal governments. The Federal Labor government elected in 1983 also pursued unprecedented close relationships with big business which the *National Times* and the *Times on Sunday* criticised. The Hawke government's favourable treatment of Fairfax's competitor - Rupert Murdoch's company News Corporation - led in part to Fairfax's near dissolution and the context in which the *Times on Sunday* closed. This context was prohibitive for any journalism except that which was friendly to the political establishment which was then the right wing of the Labor Party otherwise known as 'the machine'.

The thesis and the script establish that the corruption alleged in *National Times* stories warranted such 'hard-nosed journalism'. Long-standing practices such as extortion had become institutionalised during the Vietnam War when Kings Cross was a popular 'rest and recreation' destination. Drug trafficking particularly of heroin led to unforeseen profits which were laundered through gambling. Its impact on society eroded traditional tolerance of corruption which had evolved from unenforceable laws. Whistle blowers and reform minded politicians began demanding reform, especially after the corruption related murders of community figures such as Donald Mackay and Juanita Nielsen during the 1970s. By the 1980s, the *National Times* was far from alone in calling for reform. However, the Wran government was reluctant to initiate reform; the NSW Police Force being one example.

The traditional ‘talking heads’ documentary format makes the *National Times* ‘team’ of journalists - the main focus. This structure expresses that events described in the script arose out of circumstances just as much if not more so than individuals. Moreover, integration of this traditional form with fiction film motifs for example foregrounds the script’s construction rather than the techniques of cinema verite or docu-auteurs which efface their own manipulation of events. The dialogue in ‘Bastard of a Paper’ is sourced from previously published material, archival footage and to a lesser extent from three personal interviews with former *National Times* journalists - David Hickie, Wendy Bacon and Evan Whitton. The sources for all dialogue in the script are cited in Chapter Three of the thesis and its footnotes. With few exceptions, the dialogue in the script is from previously published sources.

Acknowledgements

The script mainly uses previously published material. Sources are credited in the footnotes for the commentary for the script. Grammar has been changed as appropriate to the script. Occasionally, dialogue has been invented for characters though every attempt has been made to ensure it conveys no attitude or belief not already expressed by the speaker in previously published material. Invented dialogue has generally been used to minimise the use of narration.

I would like to thank Alec Morgan and Eric Loo for their support with the script and thesis respectively. Thanks also to Damian Light.

Abbreviations

AAP: Australian Associated Press
AFP: Australian Federal Police
AJA: Australian Journalists Association
AJC: Australian Jockey Club
ALP: Australian Labor Party
BRW: Business Review Weekly
FOI: Freedom of Information
HWT: Herald and Weekly Times
ICAC: Independent Commission against Corruption
IV: standard head and shoulders interview shot
MLA: Member of NSW Legislative Assembly
MP: Member of Parliament
NCA: National Crime Authority
NSW: New South Wales
ONA: Office of National Assessments
QC: Queen's Council
QLD: Queensland
R&R: rest and recreation
SCG: Sydney Cricket Ground
SMH: Sydney Morning Herald
SP: Starting Price Betting
UNSW: University of NSW